



**HESED HOUSE**  
**Comprehensive Homeless Resource Center**

*Ending Homelessness, One Person — One Family — at a Time...*

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*Testimony presented by Ryan Dowd, Public Action to Deliver Shelter (dba Hesed House)  
Illinois Human Services Commission ~ September 13, 2011.*

Thank you for the opportunity to speak at this hearing. My name is Ryan Dowd. I am the Executive Director of Hesed House, an organization here in Aurora that attempts to serve the needs of families and individuals who are homeless with a one-stop-shop approach to services. We provide emergency shelter, transitional housing and permanent supportive housing, as well as an array of services to help people get back on their feet again (job training, mental health and substance abuse counseling, legal and veteran's services, medical care, etc.).

I will keep my comments short.

I understand the need for budget cuts. The State needed to trim expenses in order to be in line with revenue projections.

There was a serious mistake made, though, in cutting the Emergency Shelter and Transitional Housing line item disproportionately to other cuts. My concern is not about fairness. My concern is about the extreme consequences these cuts will have on the poorest citizens of our state.

Emergency shelters are a lot like the emergency room in a hospital. They are a place of last resort and triage. When there are problems in other parts of the social service net (such as cuts across social services), more people become homeless and need shelters. With a crippled emergency shelter system, we will not be able to respond to even current levels of homelessness, much less increased levels.

At Hesed House (here in Aurora) we are at crisis levels already. Last week we set a record; we had the highest number of individuals in the shelter since we opened in 1983. Our shelter is designed for 145 individuals and we were able to jam 214 men, women and children into a small space. Much of the increase is a marked increase in the number of families with children. Between our emergency shelter and transitional housing we are averaging around 70 children per night.

We are almost at the breaking point, where we will have to turn individuals away. I don't mean that every bed is full in the shelter. I mean every bed is full *and* every chair is full. The attached picture was taken at night in our dining room. The individuals asleep in the chairs are there because there are no beds available and we don't want to turn them away. For the first time since we opened in 1983 we may have to tell individuals that we cannot help them with even food or shelter.

I have talked to other shelters that are closing down for part of the year, and others are questioning whether they can remain open at all (and there is no redundancy in the system; if a shelter closes, it leaves that area without an emergency shelter).

When people do not have access to the basics (food, shelter, security), a few things happen:

- 1) Some people die. Every winter individuals across our state freeze to death for lack of appropriate shelter.
- 2) Crime increases. With faced with the prospect of starvation or sleeping outside during a brutal winter, people take desperate measures.
- 3) The individuals deteriorate farther, requiring more expense assistance in the future. Trying to survive outside causes mental health problems, substance abuse issues, deterioration to physical health and legal challenges. The longer someone is forced to sleep on the street the more difficult—and more costly—it will be to help them return to society.

Again, I understand the need for budget cuts. I would ask this committee to reconsider disproportionate cuts to the Emergency Shelter and Transitional Housing line item. The consequences for individuals—and the system—could be catastrophic.

I would gladly answer any questions or explore these issues further with the committee.

Thank you for your time.

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